

NEW CIA CHIEF ENLISTS SCHOLARS IN CONTEST WITH 'DESPOTISM'

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WASHINGTON

Robert M. Gates, in line to take over the CIA, has long sought to engage scholars in combatting what he sees as a relentless Soviet assault in the Third world, and his efforts once touched off a sharp dispute at Harvard.

"Preserving the liberty of this nation is fundamental to and prerequisite for the preservation of academic freedom," Gates said in a speech at Harvard a year ago, warning scholars that refusing to cooperate with the CIA jeopardized the struggle against Kremlin expansionism.

"In defending the nation and our liberties, the federal government needs to have recourse to the best minds in our country," he argued.

Gates, who was then the No. 3 man at the CIA and its chief analyst, sweetened his tough talk by relaxing the restrictions the agency puts on outside consultants and pledging not to censor their views.

"We are looking for people to challenge our views, to argue with us," he said, explaining that he wanted to reestablish links shattered in the 1970s by "the wrenching divisions ... over the Vietnam War." Gates, 43, nominated Monday by President Reagan to succeed the hospitalized William J. Casey as the nation's intelligence chief, is likely to be questioned on his views about the Soviet Union when he appears at a Senate confirmation hearing Feb. 17.

He views the rivalry between Washington and Moscow, as "the most profound contest in history," pitting Western civilization against "despotism." "The chief threat posed by the Soviet Union is not necessarily in the vastness of its military forces — though vast they are, but like the barbarians facing Rome, in the relentlessness of their assault," he said.

"The most immediate threat from the Soviet Union for the next decade will be the Soviet's exploitation of economic, social and political problems in the Third World to foster instability," he said. "They advance where there is a vacuum, where hostile forces are weak, or they insinuate themselves through clandestine means." The controversy at Harvard arose over CIA payments to three professors to do research on the developing world.

All three were cleared of wrongdoing after an investigation by the university, although one, Nadav Safran, stepped down as director of the Harvard Center for Middle Eastern studies while retaining his post as a tenured professor.

The debate in the 1970s led Congress to severely restrict covert CIA activities abroad and to slash the agency's budget. The cuts reduced the number of CIA analysts working on the Soviet economy, including the military economy, from 300 to fewer than 50 in 1980, Gates wrote in a Dec. 12, 1984 article in the Washington Post.

Casey won substantial increases for the CIA budget, and the agency has been able to rebuild its analytical capabilities, largely under Gates' direction. The size of the CIA budget is classified.

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Besides beefing up the in-house staff, Gates used some of the money to hire more outside consultants, to boost the number of CIA-sponsored conferences from just three or four a year before 1982 to more than 300 from 1982 to 1985, and to send its own people to private conferences on 1,500 occasions.

Gates' fear of the "the Soviet threat" is no less profound than that of Casey, who used the bigger agency budget to carry out the "Reagan doctrine" of sending foreign armies against pro-Soviet governments.

Gates used different tools. He enlisted U.S. experts to fight parallel to the covert armies.

"I believe that covert action is an appropriate instrument of foreign policy, as long as it is undertaken in the context of a larger policy," Gates said in his confirmation hearing for the No. 2 CIA job last April 10.

Gates' presaged his overture to scholars in the dissertation he wrote in 1974 to earn a doctorate in Soviet history from Georgetown University.

The thesis examined how the Kremlin enlisted experts to formulate policy toward China and especially how Moscow should react to the improvement in relations between the United States and China.

In his confirmation hearings last April, Gates reassured the Senate Intelligence Committee that he would adhere to oversight laws passed in the 1970s to ensure that the CIA, in its contest with the Kremlin, does not emulate Soviet methods.

He described the oversight process as a "revolution" and told the Senate panel he regards Congress "as a legitimate consumer and user of intelligence" along with the executive branch.